Bill Would Require EPA to Develop Guidance to Clean Up Illegal Drug Labs

A hearing on legislation that would require the Environmental Protection Agency to develop voluntary guidelines for the remediation of former methamphetamine labs will be held by the House Science Committee March 3.

Specifically, the Methamphetamine Remediation Research Act of 2005 (H.R. 798) would require EPA in consultation with the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) to develop voluntary guidelines, including guidance for preliminary site assessments and for the remediation of residual contaminants, the committee said.

The legislation would establish a research program within EPA to support development and revision of the guidance, and it would require EPA to have the National Academies create a panel to help assist the agency's effort.

In addition, H.R. 798 would authorize $3 million for each of fiscal years 2006 through 2009 for EPA, and $1.5 million for each of those year for NIST.

Rep. Bart Gordon (D-Tenn.), ranking member of the Science Committee, introduced H.R. 768 on Feb. 15 together with Committee Chairman Sherwood Boehlert (R-N.Y.) and Rep. Ken Calvert (R-Calif.).

A Growing Problem. The legislation addresses an issue that has become a top priority for many state and local governments, a Science Committee aid told BNA March 2.

Abuse of methamphetamine, a powerful stimulant, is growing, according to information from the committee.

In 1993, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) seized 218 methamphetamine labs. By 2004 there were nearly 16,000 illegal labs operating in 49 states, the Science Committee said.

Production of every pound of methamphetamine yields up to 5 pounds of waste chemicals such as lye, red phosphorus, hydriodic acid, and iodine that contaminate land, streams and rivers, and public sewer systems, according to information from DEA.

If a lab makes 20 pounds of methamphetamine a day, it will create 80 to 120 pounds of hazardous waste, the Department of Justice previously told BNA (62 DEN A-12, 03/30/00).

"This waste is frequently poured down drains or spilled onto the ground, potentially contaminating soil, surface water, groundwater, and septic systems," according to information the Science Committee released in preparation for the hearing.

National Guidelines Needed. Between 1992 and 2002, the number of cleanups increased from 394 to more than 7,000, DEA said.

Once DEA or its state counterparts have completed the initial phase of cleanup in which the illicit laboratory equipment, chemicals, and obviously contaminated furnishings are removed, property owners typically are required to address residual contamination, according to the Science Committee.

"There are no national guidelines or regulations on how to clean up a residential meth lab for reoccupation," the Science Committee said in background information for the March 3 hearing.

While seven states—Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Minnesota, Tennessee, and Washington—have established decontamination standards specific to methamphetamine, there has been little scientific research to determine whether these standards are correct, the committee aid told BNA.

Little is known about the effects that short-term exposures to high concentrations of meth-related chemicals may have, the committee aide said, adding that emergency responders and law enforcement officials may experience these types of exposures.

"Little also is known about the consequences of long-term exposure to the traces of chemicals that individuals, including children, may receive from living in a former meth lab, although cases of lingering health effects from such exposures have been reported," the Science Committee said.

While the lack of guidance has been a problem for years, the committee aid told BNA it is becoming an even greater problem due to the growth of small laboratories that may be set up in apartments, hotel rooms, and other properties.

By Pat Phibbs